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NOTES

KEATS'S PROPHECY OF WHITMAN, WHITMAN'S CRITIQUE OF KEATS

1

In an October 1818 letter, John Keats writes to his younger brother, George, and sister-in-law, Georgina, who were at the time in the process of moving to Louisville, Kentucky, to inform them that their youngest brother Tom's bout with tuberculosis had worsened. Halfway through the letter, Keats turns from these familial concerns to consider the possibility and limitations of an "American Stryle" of literature:

> Dilke, whom you know to be a Godwin perfectibil[it]y Man, pleases himself with the idea that America will be the country to take up the human intellect where england leaves off—I differ there with him greatly—A country like the united states whose greatest Men are Franklins and Washington's will never do that—They are great Men doubtless but how are they to be compared to those our countrey [*sic*] men Milton and the two Sidney—The one is a philosophical Quaker full of mean and thrifty maxims the other sold the very Charger who had taken him through all his Battles—Those American's [*sic*] are great but they are not sublime Man—the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime—Birkbeck's mind is too much in the American Stryle [*for* Style]—you must endeavor to infuse a little Spirit of another sort into the Settlement, always with great caution, for thereby you may do your descendants more good than you may imagine.

Keats's misspelling of "perfectability" is indicative of what he thinks of William Godwin's notion of the perfectibility of humanity and the inevitable "course of progressive improvement" that Charles Wentworth Dilke espoused. His misspelling of "countrey," meanwhile, is suspiciously similar to the antiquated spelling Edmund Spencer uses in *The Faerie Queene*: "Their kingdome spoild, and countrey wasted quight." These so-called misspellings are, in fact, not misspellings at all but elements of Keats's thinking, and they offer a means of under-

standing his critique of "the American Stryle."

Keats begins his consideration of the United States with a critique of progressivist historicism. William Godwin, in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influences on Morals and Happiness* (1793), had argued that "perfectibility is one of the most unequivocal characteristics of the human species, so that the political, as well as the intellectual state of man, may be presumed to be in a course of progressive improvement" (11). Keats connects this optimism to the United States itself, echoing Voltaire's critique of Leibnizian optimism and its relation to New World expansionism. Keats clearly rejects this vision of history—"I differ there with him greatly," he states—before turning to the "greatest Men" of the United States, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, the former of whom he deems "a philosophical Quaker full of mean and thrifty maxims" and the latter "sold the very Charger who had taken him through all his Battles."

Keats presents Franklin and Washington as opposites: on the one hand Franklin concerns himself too much with petty minutia, albeit disguised as maxims, while Washington is overly careless, disregarding even that which has provided him with his success. Both partake too much of a Leibnizian optimism: Franklin's meticulousness belies a faith in the profundity of even his most "mean and thrifty" statements, while Washington's carelessness belies an overconfidence in himself.

There is an irony to Keats's claim, however; he insists that Americans will never attain to the sublime but also encourages his brother to "infuse a little Spirit" in the New World, presumably so that Americans might attain to that sublimity. It is with this optimism in mind that Keats prophesies "the first American Poet" and offers "an infant's lullaby" that begins with a quote from Hamlet's Act III.2 soliloquy:

> If I had a prayer to make for any great good, next to Tom's recovery, it should be that one of your Children should be the first American Poet. I have a great mind to make a prophecy and they say prophecies work out their own fulfillment.
>
> 'Tis 'the witching time of night'
> Orbed is the Moon and bright
> And the Stars they glisten, glisten
> Seeming with bright eyes to listen

For what listen they?
For a song and for a cha[r]m
See they glisten in alarm
And the Moon is waxing warm
To hear what I shall say.
Moon keep wide thy golden ears
Hearken Stars, and Hearken Spheres
Hearken thou eternal Sky
I sing an infant's lullaby,
a pretty Lullaby!
Listen, Listen, listen, listen
Glisten, glisten, glisten, glisten
And hear my lullaby?
Though the Rushes that will make
Its cradle still are in the lake:
Though the f linnen then that will be
Its swathe is on the cotton tree;
Though the wollen that will keep
It wa[r]m, is on the silly sheep;
Listen Stars light, listen, listen
Glisten, Glisten, glisten, glisten
And hear my lullaby!
Child! I see thee! Child I've found thee
Midst of the quiet all the around thee!
Child I see thee! Ch[i]ld I spy thee
And they mother sweet is nigh thee!
Child I know thee! Child no more
But a Poet *ever*more
See, See the Lyre, the Lyre
In a flame of fire
Upon the little cradle's top
Flaring, flaring, flaring
Past the eyesight's bearing—
Awake it from its sleep
And see if it can keep
Its eyes upon the blaze.
Amaze, Amaze!
It stares, it stares, it stares
It dares what no one dares
It lifts its little hand into the flame
Unharm'd, and on the strings
sings
Paddles a little tune and signs
with dumb endeavor sweetly!
Bard art thou completely!
Little Child

O' the western wild
Bard art thou completely!—
Sweetly, with dumb endeavor.—
A Poet now or never!
Litt[l]e Child
O' the western wild
A Poet now or never! (*Selected Letters,* 155-156)

The same month these verses were written, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman and Walter Whitman, living in the West Hills district of Long Island, would learn that they were expecting their second child. This prophecy, as Keats deems it, or, alternately, this lullaby—especially in its final lines—bears a striking resemblance to Emerson's "The Poet" (1844), which famously inspired Walt Whitman to compose *Leaves of Grass* (1855). As Keats calls for a poet who is a "Litt[l]e Child o' the western wild," Emerson begins his essay with the image of "a moody child and wildly wise" and concludes with the famous exhortation: "O poet! a new nobility is conferred in groves and pastures, and not in castles, or by the sword-blade, any longer."

Both Keats and Emerson foresee an American poet who is childish and wild, associated with natural landscapes rather than European castles or manors, and it does not take long, in reading *Leaves of Grass*, to notice these twin characteristics of Whitman's poetics. "A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; / How could I answer the child? … I do not know what it is any more than he," Whitman famously muses, comparing himself to not only the child but also the grass itself—a concatenation of poet, child and nature prophesied by both Keats and Emerson.

Keats's letter—with both its lullaby and misspellings in mind—becomes prophetic of an "American Stryle" to come. After his discussion of Washington and Franklin, Keats concedes that "Those American's are great," adding an unnecessary possessive to the noun and so suggesting that his critique of Washington and Franklin revolves around their individualism and possessiveness. These Americans, the grammatical error suggests, mistake plurality for possession; they fret over the smallest minutia, then turn and sell their one prized possession. The irony is that Whitman's poetry does not eschew these

tendencies but embraces them unequivocally; Whitman transforms this individualism into the very essence of creation, a synonym of God. "Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news; the fitful events; / These come to me days and nights, and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself": Whitman deifies the first-person singular pronoun and claims all things for himself, his possessions.

Whitman, in other words, does not so much avoid Keats's critique of the "American Stryle" as exemplify it, exaggerating the individualism of Washington and Franklin to such an extent that it bursts from its seams, becomes divine. Keats's misspelling of "Stryle," in this sense, is not a misspelling at all but a kind of hint at the stridency that would, with Whitman, come to characterize American poetry.

2

We need not presume that Keats intended his misspellings to reveal some hidden, unstated meaning about American culture. As Keats himself says, "prophecies work out their own fulfillment," and his prophecy is no exception. While he was composing his lullaby as a kind of paean to his brother's children, it becomes, with hindsight, a kind of prophecy of Walt Whitman, a prediction or summoning of an utterly American bard who would "paddle a little tune and sing [or sign] / with dumb endeavor sweetly." Whitman, in his own right, claimed to have read all of Keats in 1888 and said of Keats's poetry that it gives "the feeling of a gentlemanly person lately at college, accepting what was commanded him there, who moves and would only move in elegant society, reading classical books in libraries." Earlier in his life, however, Whitman had deemed Keats's work "sweet—oh! very sweet—all sweetness: almost lush: lush, polish, ornateness, elegancy" and, in a review of Keats's *Poetical Works* for the *Daily Eagle*, had remarked: "Keats—peace to his ashes—was one of the pleasantest of modern poets, and had not the grim monster of Death so early claimed him, would doubtless have become one of the most distinguished."

Keats's prophetic vision of Whitman is mirrored by Whitman's critical reception of Keats; what begins as adoration ends in scorn, just

as the sing-song lullaby of Keats's prophecy augurs, counterintuitively, Whitman's unrhymed free verse. Keats and Whitman are remarkably antithetical: one produced his poems before the age of twenty five, the other (except for scattered juvenilia, all rhymed and metered verse) after thirty; one wrote rhymed, metrical verse, the other unrhymed, unmetrical verse; one took as his poetic subjects Grecian Urns and Endymion, the other "Me myself" and "the blab of the pave." At the same time, the two share a number of biographical and aesthetic similarities: both have been historicized—wrongly or no—as scions of older, more well-established poets—Wordsworth and Coleridge for Keats, Emerson for Whitman—and both were raised in working-class households that were unable to afford tuition at Eton, in Keats's case, or, in Whitman's case, secondary school at all. Here are the opening lines of Keats's "Ode to Psyche," the first of his 1819 odes:

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
    By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
    Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
    The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?

Compare this with the opening lines of Whitman's "Oh Me! Oh Life!":

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?) (410).

Both poems begin with an interjection; it was Robert Hass, in conversation with Czesław Miłosz, who noted the difference between "O" and "Oh": "'Oh!' [is] a long breath of wonder, the equivalent [of] 'Wow!' […] 'O!' [is] a caught breath of wonder and surprise, more like Huh!'" Keats's poem begins with a caught breath of wonder, the sudden recognition of a goddess, while Whitman's begins with a long breath of wonder, an adoration of "me," of "life." Both poems begin with short, fragmented sentences, punctuated by exclamation marks, and they continue with the use of a plural demonstrative adjec-

tive—"these"—reiterating an immediacy that is first indicated by those opening breaths of wonder. These poems are both apostrophic, and the immediacy of this address is reiterated by both the opening interjections and the use of demonstrative adjectives. They both give the sense that their speakers are in direct communication with a Goddess or "me […] life," respectively.

That said, what is particularly interesting is not the similarities between these two poems or poets but rather the ways in which Keats's prophecy and Whitman's critical analysis of Keats's poetry are remarkably apt: these two poets, though they never met and their lives only overlapped by some twenty-odd months, understood each other deeply and coherently. Keats predicted that the "poet […] o' the western wild" would be like a "litt[l]e child," spelling his words improperly as an illustration of this naïveté, while Whitman sees Keats as both elegant and insincere—overwrought, perhaps, but "sweet—oh! very sweet."

The observation that Whitman's poetry has a certain naïveté is nothing new. Joanna Zach, in her "Whitman and Miłosz's America" (2011), deems Whitman the "poet of ecstatic gibberish and childish astonishment," while, as early as 1959, Frederic Carpenter was complaining that "the duplicity of Whitman's 'innocence' has been condemned so often that Professor [Leslie] Fiedler truly calls him 'the whipping boy of many of our best critics.'" Keats's prophecy, however, reminds us that this emphasis on Whitman's innocence or childishness is deeply entwined with the European understanding of the New World as innocent and childlike. Keats sees the poet of the western wild as a "litt[l]e child," implying that the New World was itself puerile and undeveloped. Whitman's interpretation of Keats, meanwhile, illustrates the American conception of Europe as both elegant and pretentious, overly concerned with respectability.

3

The same month Keats wrote his letter to George and Georgina he was composing what has become, among English-language poets at least, one of the most well-known letters in the English language—the

letter to Richard Woodhouse in which Keats proclaims, "As to the poetical Character itself […] it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion [*sic*] Poet" (*Selected Letters,* 148). Keats' "camelion poet" has no trouble misspelling words or making prophecies and allowing them to "work out their own fulfillment"; Keats revels in the possibilities that open to him when he concerns himself no longer with consistency or virtue but with the negative capability of his language, its ability to defy, deny or resist clarity. Whitman shares both Keats's disregard for consistency and his penchant for playing the prophet, declaring in *Democratic Vistas*:

> Yet I have dream'd, merged in that hidden-tangled problem of our fate, whose long unraveling stretches mysteriously through time—dream'd out, portray'd, hinted already—a little or a larger band—a band of brave and true, unprecedented yet—arm'd and equip'd at every point—the members separated, it may be, by different dates and States, or south, or north, or east, or west—Pacific, Atlantic, Southern, Canadian—a year, a century here, and other centuries there—but always one, compact in soul, conscience-conserving, God-inculcating, inspired achievers, not only in literature, the greatest art, but achievers in all art—a new, undying order, dynasty, from age to age transmitted […] Arrived now, definitely, at an apex for these Vistas, I confess that the promulgation and belief in such a class or institution—a new and greater literatus order—its possibility, (nay certainty,) underlies these entire speculations—and that the rest, the other parts, as superstructures, are all founded upon it (969).

Whitman, in his typical, grandiose "American Stryle," is not content to prophecy about only one bard but "a new, undying order," formed not only of writers but also "achievers in all art." Dreams are important to both poets; Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" tells of the "latest dream I ever dreamt" of "pale kings and princes too, / pale warriors, death-pale were they all," while Whitman, in "Song of Myself," exclaims, "Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams, / Now I wash the gum from your eyes." In the above prophecy, Whitman sees not only the prophecy itself but also the "hidden-tangled problem of our fate" as "dream'd," just as Keats connects his proph-

ecy of the "little child of the western wild" with a lullaby, which will, ostensibly, coax the child to sleep.

Misspellings and the blab of the pave, dreams and prophecies, goddesses and identity: these are subjects beyond the purview of the "virtuous philosop[h]er," who, like Whitman's "learn'd astronomer," is preoccupied with "proofs [and] figures, [...] charts and diagrams, to add, divide and measure." Whitman is as preoccupied with negative capability as Keats is: "Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat, / Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best, / Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice" (26). (The word "not," in the final version of "Song of Myself," is repeated over one hundred times.) As Floyd Stovall notes in his analysis of Whitman's marginalia in Aubrey De Vere's "Modern Poetry and Poetics" (1849), "Whitman bracketed much of [De Vere's] section on Keats, but [...] seemed especially interested in the following sentence: '[Keats's] mind had itself much of that 'negative capability' which [Keats] remarked on as a large part of Shakespeare's greatness.'" We often think of Romanticism and American Transcendentalism as critical responses to Enlightenment rationalism, but we often forget to think of these movements' antecedents, those movements that, like Romanticism and Transcendentalism, foreground the mysterious and negative, the opaque and enigmatic. As Norman O. Brown has argued, the antecedents of Romanticism are often lost in Western literary history because they arrive from the Islamic rather than the Christian tradition: ". . . the fundamental nature of Protestant radicalism is to eliminate angels altogether. . . . In the West . . . [t]he prophetic angel passes over into literature as it withers in the Church. In Dante and in Blake. And Muhammad is the bridge between Christ and Dante and Blake." We might add, as way of denouement, Keats and Whitman to that list.

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NOTES

1 John Keats, *Selected Letters,* ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154.

2 William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Vol. 1 (London: Robinson, 1793), 11.

3 Edmund Spencer, *The Faerie Queene* (1590; New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 130.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *Essays & Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 467.

5 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 27.

6 Walt Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (London, Ontario: A. Talbot, 1899), 109.

7 Walt Whitman, *The Journalism: 1834-1846,* Vol. I (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 264.

8 Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Poetry and Prose*, 23, 29.

9 John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 340.

10 Robert Hass, *Time and Materials* (New York: Ecco Press, 2007), 38.

11 Joanna Zach, "Whitman and Miłosz's America," *Przekladaniec. Between Miłosz and Milosz* 25 (2011), 84. Frederic Carpenter, "'The American Myth': Paradise (To Be) Regained," *PMLA* 74 (1959), 603.

12 Keats, *Complete Poems,* 299; Whitman, Poetry & Prose, 77.

13 Whitman, *Poetry & Prose*, 401-402.

14 Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), 248.

15 Norman O. Brown, *The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Traditions* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2009), 44.